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THE EFFECT OF THE ITALIAN SURRENDER UPON GERMANY

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THE EFFECT OF THE ITALIAN SURRENDER UPON GERMANY

Summary

After the fall of Mussolini German propaganda was able to counteract the effects of the Italian setback by emphasizing that Italy remained in the war and, by doing so, demonstrated that Allied demands for "unconditional surrender" were unacceptable to any kind of government whatsoever. Simultaneously, measures like the appointment of Himmler as Minister of the Interior were calculated to point up the difference between the German and the Italian situation and to serve as warning to those conservative groups in Germany which might be inclined to follow the Italian example.

The acceptance of "unconditional surrender" by the Italian government thus created an entirely new situation. Hitler's authority was needed to cope with it. The Fuehrer's speech tried to prove that the Italian surrender was due not to a critical military situation, but rather was the result of a reactionary conspiracy. In concentrating exclusively on Italy Hitler diverted attention from the unfavorable aspects of the general situation, and relatively minor German successes---such as the abduction of Mussolini and the establishment of a Republican Fascist Government---could be emphasized out of their real proportion and used for the purpose of bolstering home morale.

Nevertheless, if Germany suffers defeats in Italy, the German people will certainly realize the seriousness of the situation created by Italy's defection. Emotional and nationalistic appeals, which seem to be becoming main elements of the official German propaganda, can hardly counteract the adverse effect of this event on German morale.

However, it cannot be expected that the deterioration of civilian morale can as yet be transformed into political action against the regime. The great bulk of the German public is held firmly in the grip of Nazi control mechanisms.

Reactionary groups which may be tempted to try a coup against the regime and the underground movement engaged in active opposition will hardly be encouraged by the course of events. The reactionaries have again become targets of official attacks and are under Party suspicion and supervision. Moreover, the Italian events may have suggested to them that a deal might always be possible at the last moment.

The appeal of the underground will not be strengthened because the Italian events seem to prove that a social revolution, at which these groups aim, is by no means a necessary consequence of the fall of a totalitarian regime.

It may be assumed, however, that the fighting spirit of the German soldier in Italy, faced with particularly difficult conditions, will be impaired.

THE EFFECT OF THE ITALIAN SURRENDER UPON GERMANY

The impact of the Italian crisis and capitulation upon the German people forms part of a whole series of crises through which the German military front and home front have passed in the course of this summer. There is considerable evidence for the assertion that the serious military reverses on the Russian front and the heavy air blows against the home front have produced a situation inside Germany in which the people's confidence in ultimate victory under the Nazi regime has been dangerously lowered. State and Party agencies must adopt stringent measures in order to insure continued control over all aspects of public life and prevent the articulation of any opposition.

The Italian crisis has been the third recent major calamity. The full weight of the crisis has made itself felt only in the gradual unfolding of the series of events leading to the final capitulation of Italy. To evaluate its effects in terms of German morale involves a discussion of the complexity of social relations inside Germany and of possible shifts in the distribution of power among groups which might become politically effective in opposition to the regime.

I.

There is general agreement from various sources, both neutral and German, that the German public was greatly agitated over the fall of Mussolini. The possible dangers connected with this unexpected turn of events considerably strengthened basic fears, distrust, and the generally low estimate of the Italian ally which the majority of German soldiers and civilians have always felt.

The impact of the event and the lines of public thoughts and feelings are partly revealed by the way in which the official German propaganda machinery attempted to counteract its possible effects on civilian morale. The significance of the event and its implications could not be denied. The position of a dictator had been shaken; the political system of fascism was disintegrating, and the ideological foundations of the Axis alliance had collapsed. Nevertheless, for several reasons there was no complete change in the German propaganda line.

Because Italy continued to be ostensibly a factor in the war on the side of Germany and against the Allies, at least the pretense of a solid anti-Allied front could be maintained both with respect to fears of the people at home and possible centrifugal tendencies among the European

satellites of the New Order; and the whole series of events could be partially minimized as an "internal affair" not affecting the conduct of the war and without effect upon foreign policies.

This kind of cautious treatment was also in line with the general Nazi policy which continued to use the demand for "unconditional surrender" as a means for rallying popular support through fears of the consequences of surrender. The people were led to believe that unconditional surrender made it impossible for any government---regardless of its composition---to consider peace negotiations with the Allies, since any kind of advantageous "deal" seemed to be ruled out from the very beginning. If even the Badoglio regime (which might be inclined to take Italy out of the war, as many people must have feared in Germany) could not submit to Allied peace terms, hopes for a German peace short of victory were considered utterly illusory. Unconditional surrender was depicted as infinitely worse than any hardship or misery suffered as a consequence of the war itself, and these prospects were used to counterbalance any disintegrating tendencies on the home front resulting from military reverses or personal sufferings.

At the same time, active countermeasures were adopted to keep the situation firmly under control. Aside from military and political pressures upon the Badoglio government, the regime showed its real intentions of insuring control over the home front by a series of measures more potent than any propaganda. Himmler's appointment as virtual dictator over internal affairs was an unequivocal expression of the Party's intentions to maintain a firm grip on the situation and a clear warning to those groups inside the Reich---heavy industry and army---who, impressed by Badoglio's coup, might be expected to consider similar action. Subsequent moves, such as the appointment of Speer as Chief of the entire munitions and armament industry and the establishment of military rule in Denmark amplified the pattern, suggesting the general trend by which Party, state, and army authorities were reinforcing their positions, and also served as reminders that the regime was preparing for future eventualities.

II.

The character of these measures, both political and military, changed quite radically with the news of Italy's unconditional military surrender. There is no question as to the profound immediate effect of the event upon the situation at home. The serious nature of the internal crisis is confirmed (a) by the fact that the Fuehrer himself was called upon to lend his authority for an explanation of the new situation in order to anticipate and soften its repercussions at home and (b) that an entirely new orientation of German propaganda was thought necessary.

This entirely new situation was produced not so much by the fact of the collapse itself, but primarily by the nature of the defeat in the form of Italy's acceptance of unconditional surrender. The first popular reaction to this news must have been a belief that the military situation was much more catastrophic than had hitherto been suspected. This first impression would tend to be reinforced if and when people began to speculate upon other negative consequences: (1) If Italy did not remain loyal to her Axis partner, to what extent could other allied and satellite nations be considered reliable? (2) A government whose leaders had negotiated with Nazi leaders, and which must be assumed to be familiar with Nazi plans and resources, had made a conscious choice in favor of the Allies and apparently considered unconditional surrender compatible with national honor for the sake of peace---in much the same way the Marshal of France claimed to be motivated when he threw in the lot of his country with Germany and Italy. The alteration in military fortunes in this historical parallel would not be lost on the German observer.

That the Nazi leadership actually considered these topics as most important and relevant for the state of civilian morale is confirmed by an analysis of Hitler's speech (September 10, 1943). The greater part of this speech was concerned with one dominant theme: the transformation of the military act of unconditional surrender into a political conspiracy of a reactionary clique. More specifically, it was emphatically denied that the Italian collapse was either an expression of popular will or an expression of Allied military strength; instead, it was attributed exclusively to a reactionary, plutocratic conspiracy which sold out nation and people to the enemy in order to preserve its own powers and privileges. Thus an attempt was made to minimize the possible effect of the military situation upon the German people by shifting the act of unconditional surrender to the political level of reactionary class interests and the personal level of betrayed loyalties ("stab in the back").

A crucial problem, however, remained: a national government had taken its people out of the war in the apparent hope of putting an end to its deprivations and sufferings. As there are strong indications of similar aspirations among the German people, these hopes and desires had to be anticipated and counteracted. Hitler did so in several ways:

(1) The people are impressed and reassured by the personal position of Hitler and the composition of and the loyal relations among the German leadership. Hitler's position is unendangered by a King or Marshal, and the character of German leadership is such that traitors, like Badoglio, are impossible. (2) To the military, reactionary elite this is a veiled threat and warning to identify themselves even more fully with the regime, for counter-revolutionary manoeuvers will be ruthlessly dealt with. (3) The war is depicted as having again become a war for German national survival, and the nation is called upon to draw strength not only from its isolation, protected by an impregnable "ring of steel," but also from its hopes and sacrifices for the future greatness of the Reich.

Hitler's exclusive concentration on the Italian collapse served to obscure, for the time being, certain obvious omissions from his speech unfavorable either to Germany's military situation or to previous Nazi propaganda lines: he did not mention the reverses in Russia, did not explain the failure of the U-boat warfare, held out no immediate protection against air raids, and was not able to blame either Communism or the Jews for the collapse of Italy.

To concentrate upon a single aspect of a situation which, in its entirety, is rather unfavorable has always been a standard Nazi technique in the manipulation of the masses. When the Party had suffered its first serious setback and loss of prestige in the November elections of 1932 and was further torn and weakened by inner conflicts and revolts, Hitler threw all his personal efforts and the whole machinery of the Party into the by-election of the small district of Lippe, and there succeeded in obtaining an absolute majority which was then represented as the mandate of the entire German people in favor of the Party's bid for power. Again, shortly afterward, when there was still doubt, in spite of the ruthless persecution of all political opponents, whether an absolute majority could be obtained in the elections of March 1933, the whole internal conflict and struggle were again focused upon an isolated event---the Reichstag fire. More recently, the disaster of the entire Russian campaign in the winter 1942-43 was obscured by an exclusive emphasis and concentration upon the "heroic sacrifice" of the one army at Stalingrad, which not only diverted public attention and concern from other fronts, but even served to transform a severe military defeat into a beneficial release of public fears and tensions.

The same technique has now been used again in order to absorb the immediate shock of the Italian collapse. First, the exclusive concentration upon the isolated event serves as diversion for public concern about other unfavorable military developments. Secondly, it again seeks to transform a specific military and diplomatic defeat into a favorable morale factor shifting the emphasis to the contrast between Italian treason and German national and individual loyalty. Finally, temporary and trivial successes are fully exploited to substantiate these emotional and nationalistic appeals and to produce a more favorable popular response than the situation in its entirety would warrant. This explains the exploitation of and emphasis on minor German successes after the serious defeat. The successful abduction of Mussolini and the establishment of a Republic Fascist Government must be regarded not only as a means for providing a political basis for the continuation of the war, but assumed special importance as proof that the counter-measures of the German government had been effective. Thus they not only confirmed Hitler's protestations of personal loyalty, but emphasized that the Nazis had regained the advantage of initiative and were able to

complete successful military operations. There is reason to assume that this method has met with some temporary success. Several neutral reports indicate that the Mussolini coup especially was greeted with great enthusiasm, "grinning and elation," by the German public. How long these measures will continue to have a favorable effect on civilian morale is, however, problematic.

III.

Aside from the purpose of counteracting the immediate effects of Italy's unconditional surrender, Hitler's speech also seems to reveal certain general themes by means of which German propaganda will attempt to keep up the German will to resistance in the months to come. These themes are: appeal to German nationalism, promises of strength through isolation, and the creation of a new "Dolchstosslegende" in order to absolve the German leadership from all guilt for Germany's military reverses. (This last point was suggested by Hitler's remark that the assistance which Germany was forced to render Italy against Greece caused a fateful delay in the German campaign against Russia, and some commentators have since elaborated on this point by ascribing even the defeat at Stalingrad to the failure of an Italian division to hold its assigned position.) As to the satellite nations of Europe, it may be assumed that the case of Italy will be used as a warning not to follow similar peace inclinations of their own, since subsequent events in Italy show that the only results of surrender are bloody civil conflicts and helpless exposure to the ravages of war.

The question remains as to the effectiveness of this propaganda in securing continued support of the war and the regime by the German people. This question must be answered separately for different strata of German society:

The German public in general has been thoroughly subjected to Nazi organizations and control mechanisms which have been applied most effectively to the middle classes and workers, constituting the bulk of the population. These groups have also been the traditional representatives of German national unity, and parts of them will certainly be responsive to emotional and nationalistic appeals. Thus they may actually feel a certain relief when they hear that they are now fighting again for the very existence of Germany---a cause which they understand---while the vague slogan of the "New Order" recedes. However, these groups are at the same time especially war-weary and particularly exposed to the ravages of bombing attacks. Thus they need factual and concrete assurances that the continuation of the war does not simply mean a purposeless prolongation of suffering, but promises a peace on better terms.

Much will therefore depend on the future development of military operations. If a clear decision is not reached in Italy within a relatively short time, i.e., if Central and Northern Italy remain a battlefield throughout the winter months, especially if Germany's progressive yielding of ground is not too obvious, then the concentration of attention of the German public on Italy might yield some favorable results. It might then appear that the claims of Nazi leadership to have been fully prepared for the Italian surrender were actually true and that it might pay to continue the war under the present leadership. On the other hand, if the German armies are soon forced to retreat in Italy and the United Nations succeed in obtaining airfields in Central and Northern Italy from which bombing attacks on Southern and Eastern Germany can be launched, then the propaganda based on Italy will boomerang and the critical dangers of the situation created by the Italian surrender will impinge with doubled force. In fact, they will then reinforce and strengthen the omissions and failures which they are now employed partially to obscure.

It must be remembered, however, that in any case these "average" groups are most firmly controlled and most easily manipulated by Party and state agencies, so that a crystallization of their discontents into political action against the regime can hardly be expected.

There are, however, two groups at opposite poles of German society, which either might be able to take some action or are actually working against the regime: (a) certain reactionary cliques among big business and the army and (b) the "underground". It is not likely that the Italian events will encourage political action in either group. First, there are the general difficulties facing the reactionaries under the Nazi system, which lacks institutions through which even influential opposition could produce political changes. Besides, they have now once more become the target of official attacks, and must expect increasing pressure and surveillance by Party agencies. Thus it will be highly dangerous for them to hatch or execute any opposition plans during the present emergency. Moreover, these groups can afford to bide their time. On the one hand, the eventuality of Nazi military success leaves their position secure for the time being. On the other, in the event of adverse military developments, the Italian example must pointedly suggest that a "Badoglio deal" is always possible at the last moment.

In general, it must be assumed that a decline in Germany's military fortunes tends to increase the attraction of the "underground." However, this trend is counteracted not only by the intensification of repression under Himmler, but also by certain political implications of the Italian events. These underground groups are fighting not only for the downfall

of Fascism or Nazism, but for the establishment of a democratic order on an anti-capitalist basis. The fact that the downfall of fascism was brought about not by revolutionary action of the masses, but by a military coup d'etat, and the fact that the United Nations accepted the support of Badoglio's military regime, must raise doubts in the minds of the "underground" as to whether a victory of the United Nations will in any way help to realize their own objectives. In fact, in Italy they are now confronted with the dilemma of being asked to support because of its alleged pro-Allied attitude a regime to which they have been utterly opposed on political and ideological grounds.

Finally, the morale of the German army in Italy may well be seriously affected. Hitler's own remarks seemed to suggest a growing concern on the part of the German leadership about the state of morale among front-line troops exposed to a continuous series of defeats and "strategic withdrawals." He not only tried to encourage the home front by the example of the German soldiers, but, conversely, he emphasized specifically the fact that the soldiers should fight more fiercely in order to equal the heroism displayed by the home front under the attacks of air raids. The German troops on Italian soil are fighting under particularly difficult and unfavorable conditions. They can never be sure of the attitude of the local population---it may be outwardly friendly at one place, openly hostile at another. Besides, they cannot give free rein to their hatred and embitterment over the Italian traitors, because they must also maintain a certain conciliatory attitude towards the Italian public, large parts of which are still alleged to be on the side of Germany. It may be assumed that, in the long run, this difficult situation will be reflected in a decline of military morale among the German troops fighting on Italian soil.